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# A Review of Leadership is an Art: Max DePree

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A Review of Leadership is an Art: Max DePree

1998

David B. Ross & Rande Matteson

De Pree, M. (1989). Leadership is an art. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group.

In 1989, Max De Pree published this book titled, Leadership is an Art. This book did not involve any well-known and experienced chief executive officers such as Lee Iacocca, T. Boone Pickens, or Frank Lorenzo, but rather an overview of a furniture company. This furniture company is known as Herman Miller Furniture Company.

De Pree, the chief executive officer of Herman Miller Furniture Company, focused on his work regarding the inner company workings and philosophy and how they have become successful. The secret to good leadership revealed by De Pree does not include any hype, magic, nor complex theory to follow attributed by any scholar. The concept of successful leadership is a simple plan of action outlined in this paper. However, regardless of how simple the management style may be, some chief executive officers at other corporations would simply dismiss the approach as liberal-based and non-applicable to their particular organization. De Pree described leadership as weaving relationships through life experiences and having the ability to recognize how to apply your information for intended results.

To be at the leading edge of consumption, affluence, and instant gratification is to be at the dying edge. In fact, the Herman Miller approach forced their management teams to abandon themselves to the wild ideas of others. The Scanlon Plan was developed which allowed employees to make suggestions to management for ways to improve customer service, productivity, and quality. In the fiscal year of 1987-1988, the employees' suggestions resulted in

a 12 million dollar cost savings to the organization. These people cared about the organization because they were owners of the company; this philosophy should be initiated in other corporations' mission and visions.

The Herman Miller Company, a family business, was founded in 1923 and is considered to have been innovative in their approach to business since its inception. Over the 66-year period through trials and tribulations of the economy, business fluctuations, war, depression, and globalization, this company has reported maintaining a stronghold in its business dealings. First, the company remains profitable; second, their employees are more productive than competitors are with more employees and overhead; and lastly, the organization remains innovative. Becoming innovative allows employees to be creative and try new ideas by becoming leaders and not followers. This book contained only 136 pages and compared to other books on leadership and management; this work could be dismissed or overlooked and not be considered valid for a variety of personal reasons. However, many people who are skeptical of other philosophies might want to open their minds and consider that there could be a better way.

Examination of Herman Miller, the tiny Fortune 500 Company, was recognized in 1983 as one of the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America, and again in 1988, the company was named as One of the Nation's Ten Most Admired Companies. The company was ranked against nationwide competitors as having 456th in total sales but ranked seventh in total returns to investors. Not bad for a firm located in a small Michigan town without any bars, pool halls, and theaters. We should mention the company is not operated by a group of out of control employees, but rather has developed and fostered a professional learning organization, which produces a by-product known as revenue through business ethics.

Employees at Herman Miller have a sense of ownership, and management recognizes that one should abandon yourself to the strengths of others. As De Pree stated, the art of leadership is liberating people to do what is required of them in the most effective and humane way possible. As previously mentioned, the effect of this leadership style returned employee driven costs savings of some twelve million dollars in 1988. Communication is a focal point for successful organizations to flourish as Max De Pree subscribes to the art of listening to employees, walking around, getting his hands dirty by working and serving the company employees. By recognizing individual diversity, the leader has the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those who permit leaders to lead.

The book includes some simple stories about company employees and experiences that reminded us of the book Chicken Soup for the Soul. When we refer to this simple folksy approach to leadership, the book draws an understanding to defining what reality is, and maybe your expectations are set too high? One chapter titled Theory Fastball provides the reader with a new perspective of team dynamics and that it takes more than one person to accomplish goals, expectations, and success. In this chapter, De Pree mentioned Sandy Koufax, a professional baseball pitcher who threw one of the fastest pitches in his prime, but without a great baseball catcher to stop such speed, the pitch could be considered unmanageable. De Pree stated that every great pitcher needs an exceptional catcher. Another chapter titled The Millwright Died is another storyline to illustrate that everyone is needed, yet we cannot know and do everything ourselves. In this story, the millwright (i.e., tradesman, craftsman) was more than his position at work; he was also a poet. De Pree wanted his readers to think of this millwright as a person who wrote poetry, or was he a poet who conducted a millwright's work. Think of how these chapters pertain to team building and leadership.

De Pree encourages conflict, and contrary opinions, forcing change and visionary ideals while respecting human dignity. Relationships count more than structure, and work should be and can be productive and rewarding, meaningful and maturing, enriching and fulfilling, and healing and joyful. Work is described as being one of our greatest privileges. De Pree discussed corporate profits and the exploration of an opportunity where others see trouble. By this, De Pree reported that some people have varying strengths and weaknesses, but given the opportunity, they can excel in their jobs, by expressing their contributions, which is more important than productivity.

Leaders within the company have developed compassion for its employees and stockholders, and has formulated a participatory management style; this has been introduced under the leadership of Dr. Carl F. Frost, which is a paradigm to employee ownership. It is obvious that ownership requires a level of maturity and one can simply not walk away because they are held accountable.

The purpose of this book was stated early in the introduction, which indicated that liberating people do what is required of them is the most effective and humane way. This book deals more with ideas, beliefs, and relationships and has to do with the *why* of institutional and corporate life rather than the *how*. Why we obtain results is more important whether it be in business or education. Adult educators need to not only teach and/or facilitate, but help students grow to his or her potential and learn, getting results. At Herman Miller, they are committed to helping employees to grow as both employees and owners. Maybe, educators can have the same commitment to helping students grow as students and teachers.

Included in the book, De Pree dedicates some information to help anyone recognize his or her shortcomings. De Pree drew from his experience and mentorship providing the reader

with some reflective thought (i.e., guidance) for avoiding business pitfalls, and in short, the fallout would be devastation to the employees, families, and the company. De Pree also authored two other books that we feel can assist the leaders and managers of today: Leadership Jazz and Leading Without Power: Finding Hope in Serving Community.